The Wisdom of Adam Smith

THE GLASGOW EDITION OF THE
WORKS AND CORRESPONDENCE OF ADAM SMITH

Correspondence of Adam Smith
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The Wisdom of Adam Smith

Selected by John Haggarty
Edited and with an Introduction by
Benjamin A. Rogge

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The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word "freedom" (*ama-gi*), or "liberty." It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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Introduction

Benjamin A. Rogge

In the year 1776, Adam Smith published his *Wealth of Nations,* which, looking at its ultimate results, is probably the most important book that has ever been written.

Even an admitted Adam Smith buff — as I happily admit to being — may be somewhat embarrassed by this claim made by English historian Henry Thomas Buckle. But that Smith's ideas did have consequences — for the better or for the worse, depending on one's view — cannot be doubted. The world of today is almost certainly somewhat different than it would have been had the gypsy band that held young Adam Smith captive for a brief time never returned him to civilized life.

This adventure with the gypsies may well have been the only pure television material in the whole of Smith's life. He was born in Kirkcaldy, Scotland in 1723 and

died in Edinburgh in 1790. In between, he lived a life free of scandal, free of great incident, free of real discomfort or distress, and free of financial embarrassment. It hardly need be added that his life was also free of wife and children. He was a student (at Glasgow and Oxford) and an educator (at Edinburgh and Glasgow) and his friends were scholars and educators — but also artists, writers, businessmen and men of affairs. In a sense, though, he was always the true "spectator" of the human scene, involved in that scene, yes, but always capable of detached analysis and appraisal of everything that came within his view.

His writing is blessedly free of that use of jargon (*and* mathematics) that characterizes most of the modern materials in economics. His ideas are expressed in a lucid, straightforward manner that makes them accessible to all. He was also capable of turning out a magnificently pungent sentence. I offer in witness his description of the likely consequences of inviting the American colonies to send representatives to the British Parliament:

> . . . Instead of piddling for the little prizes which are to be found in what may be called the paltry raffle of colony faction; they might then hope, from the presumption which men naturally have in their own ability and good fortune, to draw some of the great prizes which sometimes come from the wheel of the great state lottery of British politics . . .

It is this combination of wisdom and style, plus the occasion of the 200th birthday of *The Wealth of Nations,*

that gives a reason to this (yet another) collection of Smith's words.

The true Smith disciple will be distressed by the fact of abridgment itself and by the choice of passages to be included. To the less demanding, this may well prove to be a less-time-consuming way into Smith's world than the unabridged books and papers. To all who are interested in the possibility of human societies living and prospering with freedom and order, the materials presented here should constitute a gold mine of the quotable.

The final question is, why John Haggarty? Why Haggarty as the person to do the selecting and organizing of an abridged version of the wisdom of Adam Smith? On the surface, he would seem to be a most unlikely candidate for the role. He left school at fourteen and is totally innocent of any classroom exposure to the ideas of either Adam Smith or Karl Marx. Worse yet, he is a member of what Smith called "that most unprosperous race of men" — men of letters. In other words, he lives by and for words. These words he has put into the writing of plays for the theater and of scripts for films and for television. "The greatest thing I ever found out," he says, "was what Plato stated very starkly — 'Words are tools to help us understand.' "

He has been described (in a recent article about him in the *Glasgow Evening Times*) as "of that special breed known as the Inquiring Scot." This, of course, makes him one with Adam Smith. It was my privilege to work

with John Haggarty in the making of the documentary film, "Adam Smith and The Wealth of Nations." He was responsible for both script and direction — and a happy choice he proved to be, indeed, in both roles. Three of us from the academic world, three card-carrying, licensed practitioners of the mysterious arts of the economist, were asked to serve as technical advisors in the making of the film. Our assumption was that, at best, the script would be actually written by someone who knew little or nothing about Smith and who would probably be antagonistic to Smith's ideas once he came to know them. By the time our sessions came to an end we were disabused of both of these presumptions.

I say, with no exaggeration, that John Haggarty has become an absolutely first-rate Smith scholar — and, on most issues, a Smith disciple as well. As a zealous and jealous guardian of the true Smith faith, I am pleased to place my unqualified endorsement on Haggarty's work with Smith as reflected in this volume. Without further comment, I bid you to read, to enjoy and to grow in wisdom.

Selector's Note

The quotations in this collection are taken from two works in the Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Liberty Fund, 1982) and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Liberty Fund, 1981). Sources are indicated by the letters *MS* or *WN* followed by the page numbers.

1

Education

The great secret of education is to direct vanity to proper objects.

MS 259

There is scarce any man . . . who by discipline, education, and example, may not be so impressed with a regard to general rules, as to act upon almost every occasion with tolerable decency, and through the whole of his life to avoid any considerable degree of blame.

MS 163

Before the invention of the art of printing, a scholar and a beggar seem to have been terms very nearly synonymous.

WN 148

The endowments of schools and colleges have necessarily diminished more or less the necessity of application in the teachers. Their subsistence, so far as it arises from their salaries, is evidently derived from a fund altogether independent of their success and reputation in their particular professions.

WN 760

If the teacher happens to be a man of sense, it must be an unpleasant thing to him to be conscious, while he is lecturing his students, that he is either speaking or reading nonsense, or what is very little better than nonsense. It must, too, be unpleasant to him to observe that the greater part of his students desert his lectures, or perhaps attend upon them with plain enough marks of neglect, contempt, and derision. If he is obliged, therefore, to give a certain number of lectures, these motives alone, without any other interest, might dispose him to take some pains to give tolerably good ones. Several different expedients, however, may be fallen upon which will effectually blunt the edge of all those incitements to diligence. The teacher, instead of explaining to his pupils himself the science in which he proposes to instruct them, may read some book upon it; and if this book is written in a foreign and dead language, by interpreting it to them into their own; or, what would give him still less trouble, by making them interpret it to him, and by now and then making an occasional remark upon it, he may flatter himself that he is giving a lecture. The slightest

degree of knowledge and application will enable him to do this without exposing himself to contempt or derision, or saying anything that is really foolish, absurd, or ridiculous. The discipline of the college, at the same time, may enable him to force all his pupils to the most regular attendance upon this sham lecture, and to maintain the most decent and respectful behaviour during the whole time of the performance.

WN 763

The discipline of colleges and universities is in general contrived, not for the benefit of the students, but for the interest, or more properly speaking, for the ease of the masters. Its object is, in all cases, to maintain the authority of the master, and whether he neglects or performs his duty, to oblige the students in all cases to behave to him as if he performed it with the greatest diligence and ability. It seems to presume perfect wisdom and virtue in the one order, and the greatest weakness and folly in the other. Where the masters, however, really perform their duty, there are no examples, I believe, that the greater part of the students ever neglect theirs. No discipline is ever requisite to force attendance upon lectures which are really worth the attending, as is well known wherever any such lectures are given.

WN 764

Those parts of education, it is to be observed, for the teaching of which there are no public institutions, are

generally the best taught. When a young man goes to a fencing or a dancing school, he does not indeed always learn to fence or to dance very well; but he seldom fails of learning to fence or to dance.

WN 764

Were there no public institutions for education, no system, no science would be taught for which there was not some demand; or which the circumstances of the times did not render it either necessary, or convenient, or at least fashionable, to learn. A private teacher could never find his account in teaching, either an exploded and antiquated system of a science acknowledged to be useful, or a science universally believed to be a mere useless and pedantic heap of sophistry and nonsense. Such systems, such sciences, can subsist no where, but in those incorporated societies for education whose prosperity and revenue are in a great measure independent of their reputation, and altogether independent of their industry.

WN 780–81

Though the common people cannot, in any civilised society, be so well instructed as people of some rank and fortune, the most essential parts of education, however, to read, write, and account, can be acquired at so early a period of life that the greater part even of those who are to be bred to the lowest occupations have time to acquire them before they can be employed in those occupations. For a very small expense the public can facilitate, can

encourage, and can even impose upon almost the whole body of the people the necessity of acquiring those most essential parts of education.

WN 785

By sending his son abroad, a father delivers himself at least for some time, from so disagreeable an object as that of a son unemployed, neglected, and going to ruin before his eyes.

WN 774

Do you wish to educate your children to be dutiful to their parents, to be kind and affectionate to their brothers and sisters? Put them under the necessity of being dutiful children, of being kind affectionate brothers and sisters: educate them in your own house. . . . Domestic education is the institution of nature — public education the contrivance of man. It is surely unnecessary to say which is likely to be the wisest.

MS 222

The contempt of risk and the presumptuous hope of success, are in no period of life more active than at the age at which young people choose their professions.

WN 126

2

Art and Aesthetics

In all the liberal and ingenious arts, in painting, in poetry, in music, in eloquence, in philosophy, the great artist feels always the real imperfection of his own best works, and is more sensible than any man how much they fall short of that ideal perfection of which he has formed some conception, which he imitates as well as he can, but which he despairs of ever equalling. It is the inferior artist only who is ever perfectly satisfied with his own performances.

MS 248

It is the acute and delicate discernment of the man of taste, who distinguishes the minute, and scarce perceptible differences of beauty and deformity; it is the comprehensive accuracy of the experienced mathematician, who unravels with ease the most intricate and perplexed

proportions; it is the great leader in science and taste, the man who directs and conducts our own sentiments, the extent and superior justness of whose talents astonish us with wonder and surprise, who excites our admiration, and seems to deserve our applause; and upon this foundation is grounded the greater part of the praise which is bestowed upon what are called the intellectual virtues.

MS 20

That utility is one of the principal sources of beauty, has been observed by every body who has considered with any attention what constitutes the nature of beauty. The conveniency of a house gives pleasure to the spectator as well as its regularity; and he is as much hurt when he observes the contrary defect, as when he sees the correspondent windows of different forms, or the door not placed exactly in the middle of the building. That the fitness of any system or machine to produce the end for which it was intended, bestows a certain propriety and beauty upon the whole, and renders the very thought and contemplation of it agreeable, is so very obvious, that nobody has overlooked it.

MS 179

The loss of a leg may generally be regarded as a more real calamity than the loss of a mistress. It would be a ridiculous tragedy, however, of which the catastrophe was to turn upon a loss of that kind. A misfortune of the

other kind, how frivolous soever it may appear to be, has given occasion to many a fine one.

MS 29

When we are determining the degree of blame or applause which seems due to any action, we very frequently make use of two different standards. The first is the idea of complete propriety and perfection, which, in those difficult situations, no human conduct ever did, or ever can, come up to; and in comparison with which the actions of all men must for ever appear blameable and imperfect. The second is the idea of that degree of proximity or distance from this complete perfection, which the actions of the greater part of men commonly arrive at. Whatever goes beyond this degree, how far soever it may be removed from absolute perfection, seems to deserve applause; and whatever falls short of it, to deserve blame.

It is in the same manner that we judge of the productions of all the arts which address themselves to the imagination. When a critic examines the work of any of the great masters in poetry or painting, he may sometimes examine it by an idea of perfection, in his own mind, which neither that nor any other human work will ever come up to; and as long as he compares it with this standard, he can see nothing in it but faults and imperfections. But when he comes to consider the rank which it ought to hold among other works of the same kind, he necessarily compares it with a very different standard, the common degree of excellence which is usually

attained in this particular art; and when he judges of it by this new measure, it may often appear to deserve the highest applause, upon account of its approaching much nearer to perfection than the greater part of those works which can be brought into competition with it.

MS 26

An eminent artist will bring about a considerable change in the established modes of each of those arts, and introduce a new fashion of writing, music, or architecture. As the dress of an agreeable man of high rank recommends itself, and how peculiar and fantastical soever, comes soon to be admired and imitated; so the excellencies of an eminent master recommend his peculiarities, and his manner becomes the fashionable style in the art which he practises. . . . After the praise of refining the taste of a nation, the highest eulogy, perhaps, which can be bestowed upon any author, is to say that he corrupted it.

MS 197–98

The exorbitant rewards of players, opera-singers, opera-dancers, etc., are founded upon those two principles; the rarity and beauty of the talents, and the discredit of employing them in this manner.

WN 124

Premiums given by the public to artists and manufacturers who excel in their particular occupations, are not